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ABSTRACT

The paper provides a brief overview of the state of geography instruction in the schools and discusses current problems within the discipline. Specifically, the paper examines enrollment and course offerings in geography in the elementary and secondary schools, textbooks, and student achievement. Findings indicate that less than 20% of all students will have taken a geography course by the time they graduate from high school. Geography at the high school level is usually an elective, while at the elementary level it is usually integrated into the social studies curriculum. Also, elementary school social studies textbooks contain an average of 25% geographic content: at the high school level new textbooks are being published, but most offer few alternatives to the world regional approach. Finally, statistics from the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) indicate that geographic knowledge of students is inadequate. The author states that these problems result from the inability of educational decision makers to understand the value of geographic education and from the failure of geographers to create a position statement on the role of geography in the schools. Another problem is the lack of communication between geographers and social studies educators. The conclusion is that the future of geographic education depends on the willingness of geography educators to investigate, develop, and promote the teaching and learning of geography. (Author/KC)

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AN ANALYSIS OF THE STATUS OF GEOGRAPHY IN AMERICAN SCHOOLS*

by

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Complaints about the status of geographic education in the United States are common, and so are recommendations for change. However, the data required to justify these complaints and recommendations is sparse and scarcely compelling. We know little about such simple matters as enrollments and achievement, and we know even less about more complex and significant topics such as teaching practices and the curriculum. Almost nothing is known about the processes presently shaping geographic education in the United States and we certainly do not understand how and why geography in the schools evolved into its current dismal status (Vuicich and Stoltman, 1975).

Geographic education involves more than classrooms, teachers and books (Hart, 1979). We learn geography throughout our lives in non-formal as well as formal settings, and we learn in many ways besides "schooling". But schools do have a special responsibility for certain forms of learning, especially those unlikely to occur without systematic instruction. This paper addresses that aspect of geographic education by providing a brief overview of geography in the schools. Specifically, we will examine (1) enrollment and course offerings in secondary schools; (2) geography in the elementary school; (3) textbooks; and (4) achievement. Other evidence,

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FIGURE 1 - ESTIMATED ENROLLMENTS IN GEOGRAPHY AND UNITED STATES HISTORY COURSES BY GRADE LEVELS IN 1977

Course	Junior High Schools (Grades 7-9)	Senior High Schools (Grades 9-12)	Senior High Schools (Grades 10-12 only)
Geography	208,950	310,048	88,152
U.S. History	792,605	2,723,093	1,480,114

Source: Weiss, 1978.

such as teacher education could be cited, but these four indicators seem sufficient to characterize the general situation.

Enrollment and Course Offerings

Figure 1 provides an estimate of the number of students enrolled in geography courses, Grades 7-12, in 1977. Enrollment figures for United States history are provided for comparison. Each secondary grade level, e.g. Grade 9, contains from 3,500,000 - 4,250,000 students and few students are likely to take more than one course in geography. Therefore, substantially less than 20% of all students will have taken a geography course by the time they graduate from high school. Meanwhile, almost every student will have taken at least one history course in United States history (Gross, 1977).

Figure 2 reports the availability of geography courses and United States history courses in Grades 7-12. Generally speaking, most middle schools and junior high schools teach multidisciplinary social studies, not single subjects such as geography and history. That may account for low percentages in those subjects at these grades. In the high school, geography usually is an elective course, whereas 68% of the states and the vast majority of local school districts require at least one course in United States history. So far as I know, no state requires a course in geography.

Geography in the Elementary School

Geography in the elementary school is integrated with other disciplines to form the social studies curriculum. All children in Grades K-6 receive some instruction in social studies and thereby geography, although much

FIGURE 2 - PERCENT OF SCHOOLS OFFERING GEOGRAPHY COURSES AND UNITED STATES HISTORY COURSES BY GRADE LEVELS IN 1977

Course	Junior High Schools (Grades 7-9)	Senior High Schools (Grades 9-12)	Senior High Schools (Grades 10-12 only)
Geography	5%	34%	37%
U. S. History	18%	82%	96%

Source: Weiss, 1978.

less time is given to social studies than to some other subjects such as reading and mathematics. In fact, some schools seem to be given little or no attention to social studies and/or geography despite curriculum policy to the contrary.

One indicator of the status of geography in the elementary school is the content of the social studies program. Figure 3 shows the topics most commonly studied at each grade level in elementary schools, a pattern usually described as a "modified expanding environment." This pattern while subject to local variations, continues to dominate the social studies of the elementary school, as it has for the past thirty years. Opportunities for geographic education within this pattern exist at all grade levels, but they are most obvious in Grades 3, 4 and 6.

Textbooks in the Schools

An analysis of textbooks provides important information about geography in the schools, for textbooks can exert a significant influence on what is taught and learned in the classroom. Not surprisingly, textbooks for elementary social studies conform generally to the topical pattern shown in Figure 3 and few publishers stray very far from that grade-by-grade sequence. But within the pattern, there is diversity in the actual content encountered by children. Figure 4 reports the amount of geographic content found in five major elementary social studies textbook series, Grades 3-6.

Relatively low enrollments have not deterred publishers from developing a new generation of textbooks for geography in the secondary schools. At least six new geography textbooks have been published within

FIGURE 3

SCOPE AND SEQUENCE OF ELEMENTARY SOCIAL STUDIES

Grade Level	Topic(s)
K	School, Home and Self
1	Families
2	Neighborhoods and Communities
3	Communities and Cities
4	State History and World Geography
5	United States History
6	World Cultures

Source: Wiley, 1977.

the past eighteen months and at least five more are in various stages of preparation. All are world regional geographies, typically with lengthy introductory chapters devoted to topical material. One book, exemplified by Figure 5, does take an innovative approach to combining regions and topics. Otherwise, there are few alternatives to the world regional approach except for Geography in an Urban Age, the second edition of the High School Geography Project. Today, Geography in an Urban Age is used by less than 10% of the schools presently teaching geography.

Achievement in Geography

Enrollment, curriculum and textbooks indicate opportunities to learn geography, but achievement focuses on actual outcomes. Standardized achievement tests have many limitations, such as undue emphasis on certain kinds of learing. However, tests do provide useful information.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is a principal source of national achievement data. NAEP completed its most recent survey of achievement in the social studies during the 1975-76 school year. Three different age groups were tested across various aspects of social studies achievement, including geographic knowledge. Results are reported in Figure 6, which, of course, begs the question of interpretation and meaning.

Analyzing Geography in the Schools

Most geographers decry present enrollment and achievement in precollegiate geographic education. Many disapprove the regional geography, as well as the maps and globes, that dominate the school curriculum and virtually all want more and better geography taught and learned in the schools, even though very few geographers actually participate in such efforts.

FIGURE 4 - PERCENTAGE OF GEOGRAPHIC CONTENT IN ELEMENTARY SOCIAL STUDIES TEXTBOOKS BY GRADE LEVEL AND PUBLISHER.

Grade Level	Publishers					Average by Grade
	H	HM	N	HBJ	AB	
3	51%	25%	28%	25%	30%	32%
4	19%	43%	26%	33%	27%	30%
5	17%	26%	14%	18%	4%	16%
6	12%	12%	23%	10%	4%	12%
Average by Publisher	25%	27%	23%	22%	16%	

Source: Granacki, 1979.

But what is the rationale for geography in the schools? Its marginal position may arise from an inability of educational decision makers to understand the value of a "geographic education". Equally significant may be the failure of geographers to explain their discipline to non-geographers and to "school people" in particular. A recently completed survey of the status of geographic education noted that geography is one of the few subject matter areas without an official "position statement" on its role in the schools. The National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education lists guidelines for teacher preparation in more than thirty fields, but geography is not among them. Perhaps this helps explain why 40% of the elementary teachers presently enrolled in certification programs are not required to take any geography courses. (Weiss, 1978).

The lack of position statements and guidelines does not explain fully geography's status in the schools, nor would their availability, however, desirable, be sufficient to alter the present situation. School curriculum is the result of many forces, besides scholarly wishes, as Figure 7 indicates. Diffusion of the High School Geography Project, partly hampered by limited marketing efforts, also has been constrained by its incongruity with the interests and abilities of teachers, as well as its limited success in addressing social needs. More recently, public concern about basic education, regarded here as a perceived need of the polity and economy, has created opportunities for revitalizing geographic education, but so far, geographers have not responded.

Another problem may be a conflict among various communities of inquiry. Irving Morrissett (1979) has written cogently about the

FIGURE 5

COMBINING TOPICAL AND REGIONAL GEOGRAPHY

CHAPTER 20 - THIS MUST BE THE PLACE

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF LOCATION

LOCATIONAL REQUIREMENTS

- ON TO FAIRFIELD
- ALTERING PLACE CHARACTERISTICS
- MAKING DECISIONS ABOUT LOCATION
- KODAK MOVES WEST

CHAPTER 21 - SOVIET UNION

INTRODUCTION TO SOVIET UNION

- HISTORICAL ROOTS
- CULTURAL CHARACTERISTICS
- NATURAL SETTING

THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

- ISSUES IN THE LAND
- SIBERIA WITH A BAM

THE HUMAN ENVIRONMENT

- THE SOVIET SOUTH
- TAKING A STAND: OLGA ASIMOVA'S DECISION
- INDUSTRY IN THE SOVIET UNION
- WHY MOSCOW

THE FUTURE OF THE SOVIET UNION

SOURCE: BACKLER AND LAZARUS, 1980.

barricades between social studies and social science, and it is a simple matter to paraphrase him in order to ask "Why is there a distance between geographers and social studies educators?" Exceptions abound, but the overwhelming fact is that these groups have failed to collaborate on the central task of educating America's youth. Obviously, geography can be an integral part of social studies education, but not for the sake of geography. Instead, geographers should consider their role and responsibility for the education of citizens. Conversely, social studies educators should reassess the intellectual vitality of their curriculum with an eye toward the social sciences.

The future of geographic education probably will be determined by at least two factors. Crucial will be the preceptions and beliefs of the American public, and especially the educational establishment concerning geography's significance and contributions to the education of young Americans. Equally important, however, will be the willingness and ability of geographic educators to investigate, develop and promote the teaching and learning of geography. Without responsible and effective leadership, geographic education will continue to languish.

FIGURE 6

PERCENTAGES OF "ACCEPTABLE" RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS ABOUT GEOGRAPHIC KNOWLEDGE BY AGE GROUP

Age	No. of Questions	% Responding "Acceptably"	Typical Questions
9	10	65%	Location of Missouri River
13	8	47%	Elevation/temperature relationship
17	8	55%	Industrialization/ interdependence relationshi

Source: Summaries. . ., 1979.

FIGURE 7

FORCES DETERMINING SCHOOL CURRICULUM

- NEEDS OF POLITY AND ECONOMY
- COMMON CULTURE AND SUBCULTURES
- CLIENT WANTS AND NEEDS
- KNOWLEDGE RESOURCES OF COMMUNITIES OF INQUIRY
- INTEREST OF TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS

SOURCE: SCHWAB, 1976.

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